DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 949 RC 023 819

AUTHOR	Klonsky, Michael
TITLE	Small Schools and Teacher Professional Development. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-02-6
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0027
AVAILABLE FROM	AEL, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348. Tel: 800-624-9120 (Toll Free). For full text: http://www.ael.org/ERIC/digests/edorc02-6.pdf.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Collegiality; Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Professional Development; School Size; *Small Schools; Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Collaboration; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Learning Communities

ABSTRACT

Small schools can provide an environment well suited to new and improved forms and models of teacher professional development. A compact faculty size can support close interpersonal relationships, resulting in greater teacher collaboration on interdisciplinary units and personalized teaching plans for all students. Thus, the necessity and opportunity for shared professional learning are heightened. In small schools, teachers often use peer-coaching models in which teachers serve as coaches for other teachers and facilitate reflective professional development activities that enable them to know students and themselves better. Knowing students well also entails professional development that supports the teaching of students with special needs and those from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Small size allows personnel to shift their schedules as needed to support practices the school deems important. Relationships between teachers and administrators in small schools tend to be more personal and informal, resulting in greater cooperation among the staff. Innovations resulting from teacher experience are more likely to be recognized and implemented in small schools. (Contains 26 references.) (TD)

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EDO-RC-02-6 December 2002

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Small Schools and Teacher Professional Development

Michael Klonsky

Small schools, at their best, can and often do provide new avenues for the professional development of their teachers, ones that contribute to the schools' well-documented success. They can also enhance the benefits of more common in-service professional development activities. This Digest reviews some of the recent research on professional development issues in small schools and smaller learning communities.

What Works and What Doesn't Work in Professional Development

Professional development literature of the past three decades provides clear distinctions about what works and what doesn't. This research substantiates, for example, the ineffectiveness of the all-too-common one-shot workshop (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). In contrast, effective professional development programs focus on a clear set of priorities; provide ongoing, school-based support to classroom teachers; deal with academic content as well as teaching methods; and create ample opportunities for teachers to see and attempt new teaching methods, according to many experts (National Staff Development Council, 2001). There is also evidence to show the effectiveness of professional development models that are peer-led, open-ended, classroom-based, and active (Peery, 2002). The more "extended" or ongoing and continuous the professional development, the more it encourages effective classroom practices (Wenglinsky, 2000, p. 30).

Learning From Each Other

A compact faculty size (for example, a staff of 15-20 for a school of 300) can support close interpersonal relationships. In such settings professional development is often enhanced by teaming and by small, task-oriented group formations (Mohr, 2000). For instance, teacher teams may work on interdisciplinary units, or on personalized learning plans for all students. Under these circumstances, the entire team, including guidance personnel and even career-service staff, share students and may teach multiple subjects or mixed-grade levels, or collaborate on interdisciplinary teams. Thus, the necessity and opportunity for shared professional learning are heightened.

Fine and Somerville (1998) found that the flexible scheduling and faculty teamwork in smaller schools allowed for a level of depth and an interdisciplinary approach that provided students with a much richer educational experience (p. 106). In successful small schools, they point out, "time is given for common planning and exchanging valuable information about students—and there is well-funded time for professional development" (p. 108).

While small schools' faculties often have a strong sense of collegiality among teachers rather than one strong leader (Meier, 2002; Ancess, 1997), highly active principals and lead teachers can play important roles as instructional leaders and teacher coaches, providing job-related learning experiences and time for teachers to work together (Vander Ark, 2002). Leaders in small schools often teach students themselves and may have intimate knowledge of the students as well as the things that teachers need to be effective (Cotton, 2001).

In small schools, teachers often use models of *Teacher Talk*, *Critical Friends*, or other peer-coaching models in which teachers serve as coaches for other teachers and facilitate reflective professional development activities that enable them to know students and themselves better (Klonsky & Klonsky, 1999; Guiney, 2001). Knowing students well also entails professional development that supports the teaching of students with special needs and those from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.

Practices such as interdisciplinary teaming and examining student work in small groups foster a sense of professional community. These practices both improve the capacity of teachers and contribute to a friendlier and safer learning environment (Klonsky, 2002). These professional communities, says Kathleen Cotton (2001), have as their key features the related elements of professional development and teacher collaboration. Cotton also reports that small size "allows school personnel to make shifts in their schedules as needed to support practices the school deems important" (p. 21).

Faculty-Directed Professional Development

Small faculty size makes possible stronger consensus over professional development priorities and agendas as well as the sharing of successful teaching strategies. Because relationships between teachers and administrators in small schools tend to be more personal and informal, there is a greater tendency for cooperation among the staff (Barker, 1986).

The Bank Street study (Wasley et al., 2000), which compared Chicago's new small schools to its large traditional schools, reported that small-school teachers were more likely to engage in professional development that they themselves found valuable, instead of participating primarily in professional development that was mandated or imposed by central office or school administrators. The result was a more coherent and integrated educational program in those schools. The study also reported greater teacher satisfaction and sense of responsibility for student learning.

Finally, small schools set in motion many different types of "inside-out" innovations (Larson, 1991). These are innovations that come directly out of the teaching experience rather than from top-down decision making or big changes in organizational structures. Small schools provide a better chance of seeing the results of these innovations and their connection to professional development because of the high visibility of students and their work.

Professional Development to Meet Particular Community Needs

Professional development activities in small schools, such as those discussed above, tend to be highly intensive and long-running. Such practices have been effective in helping

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teachers to collaborate within their professional communities, to personalize and integrate instruction, to build a culture of trust and collegial support, and to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools (Daniels, Bizar, & Zemelman, 2001). Wasley and Lear (2001) found that, in high-performing small learning communities, professional development was "ongoing, embedded, and site-specific" (p. 23).

There is also evidence that supports a professional development connection with teacher leadership and activism (Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000; Barth, 2001; Wood, 1992). For example, many small schools are focused around some area of social justice as their purpose or reason for being. Teachers in these schools learn about local community issues such as gang violence or joblessness as a way of engaging with their students' concerns and daily realities.

Many other small schools encourage experiential or active learning. Teachers in such schools need support in engaging their students more actively in their own learning process (Cawelti, 1997). Teachers at the Met School in Providence (RI), for example, work as coaches with students, helping them to plan their high school curriculum and work many days out of the classroom in their chosen fields. The Met has created courses to help staff develop the coaching skills they need, skills that aren't provided through traditional teacher education courses or professional development programs (Levine, 2002).

Small-school activism and teacher leadership also come into play where new small schools and smaller learning communities have emerged as part of large-school conversions and comprehensive school restructuring initiatives. In many such initiatives, teachers move into project director or principal positions, calling for new skill sets to fulfill their duties (Cushman, 1999).

Prevention of Burnout, Conflict, and Obstacles to Collaboration

The amplified demands on faculty and staff time for increased professional development can also lead to burnout and teacher resistance to small schools. Gladden (1998) found cases of teachers resisting the "heavy workload of small schools" (p. 125). These demands are especially acute in the beginning stages of new start-up schools (Ancess, 1997).

There may also be staff relationship problems that arise around professional development work, between those teachers in a school-within-a-school and those remaining with the larger school. Small-school teachers, for example, can be pulled between professional development requirements of their small school and those of the large school (Raywid, 1996).

Small-schools approaches to professional development can be stifled in cases where the program or the facilities don't support the necessary interaction among faculty members, i.e., where teachers in a team work at extreme ends of a building or have no common planning time built into their schedules.

But these problems have been overcome when good professional development strategies have been put into play. Nancy Mohr (2000) for example, found benefits when professional development was done in interdisciplinary teams: "Teachers who work on teams not only improve their craft but also begin to see the patterns in their work and relationships. They learn together, critiquing one another's practice by looking at student work" (p. 148). Other small schools have created time for professional development when their students were out doing field studies in their focus areas.

Conclusions

Teachers in small schools have found ways to take more ownership over their professional development. Small schools can provide an environment well suited to new and improved forms and models of teacher professional development, which, in turn, can lead to improvements in teaching and learning to help transform schools.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0027. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

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